***Cheer Up !***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno Dec. 17, 2023*

*based on Philippians 4:4-9*

Let me begin by reminding you of a movie made back in 2000. It’s called,

*Cast Away*. It was the old Robinson Crusoe story, updated, starring

Tom Hanks as a FedEx executive who crash lands near a remote deserted island and manages to survive. This Robinson Crusoe doesn’t have a Friday, exactly. But he does have a volleyball. Remember it’s name? Yeah, Wilson.

Here is a quote from near the end of the film from the Tom Hanks character looking back on what he’s gone through. Spoiler alert: by the time he’s gotten home, he’s been declared dead and his wife, Kelly, has remarried.

*We both had done the math. Kelly added it all up and... knew she had to let me go. I added it up, and knew that I had... lost her. 'cos I was never gonna get off that island. I was gonna die there, totally alone. I was gonna get sick, or get injured or something. The only choice I had, the only thing I could control was when, and how, and where it was going to happen. So... I made a rope and I went up to the summit, to hang myself. I had to test it, you know?*

*Of course. You know me. And the weight of the log, snapped the limb of the tree, so I- I - I couldn't even kill myself the way I wanted to. I had power over \*nothing\*. And that's when this feeling came over me like a warm blanket. I knew, somehow, that I had to stay alive. Somehow. I had to keep breathing. Even though there was no reason to hope. And all my logic said that I would never see this place again. So that's what I did. I stayed alive. I kept breathing.*

*And one day my logic was proven all wrong because the tide came in, and gave me a sail. And now, here I am. I'm back. In Memphis, talking to you. I have ice in my glass... And I've lost her all over again.*

*I'm so sad that I don't have Kelly. But I'm so grateful that she was with me on that island. And I know what I have to do now.*

*I gotta keep breathing. Because tomorrow the sun will rise. Who knows what the tide could bring?*

Keep that in mind while I shift us now to the text for today.

It’s a letter from another cast away; the apostle Paul. The story behind the letter is this. Paul has been planting Christian congregations all over the Mediterranean world. He’s been pulling together little Jesus communities gathered in the homes of rich widows, primarily, and so he has friends spread far and wide. And some years into this enterprise he disappears. No one has heard from him in a long while.

Is he dead, they wonder? Is he sick? Have pirates kidnapped him?

And then he turns up. You can tell all this by reading between the lines of the letter to Christians in the city of Philippi. He’s writing from prison somewhere, probably in Ephesus. Reading between the lines you see that the Christians at Philippi have been worried sick about him. It’s clear that they have been making inquiries all over the Mediterranean world. “Where the heck is he!”

Finally they find that he has turned up in this far-away jail.

Knowing that people in Roman custody depend upon others for their survival in prison, the Philippian church sends one of their own, a young man named, Epaphroditus with gifts -- money, a little food maybe, and a letter. Only we learn from Paul’s letter that on the way, Epaphroditus has gotten sick.

In fact, he has nearly died. Paul is touched deeply by the gesture of the young man’s sacrifice, and also by the love of these people who have gone to all this trouble to locate him.

We learn from Paul that the letter they have sent to him is a letter of concern, but looking careful into it, you can see that the concern they show is as much concern for themselves as it is for Paul.

If Paul is in prison under sentence of death, as they believe, what will become of the Christian enterprise? Is it going under? No one else in Christendom has Paul’s stature.

I mean, look, Jesus is gone – he hasn’t come back as they thought. Now it looks like Paul is maybe gone, too. What hope is there? Has their faith been in vain?

No, says the apostle. Writing from prison he appears oddly hopeful, almost serene, even confident. He says*, I thank my God in all my remembrance of you . . . thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*

They thought he was dead, and here he is – not only alive but buoyant. In this letter, Paul says to them that they are living between two days. They are living between “the first day” -- the day they found real hope in this world, and what he calls, “the day of Jesus Christ;” a day which is not Armageddon, or an end-time, but is instead a time of yet another new beginning.

They live in a middle time, an in-between time, framed by the love and purposes of God. But then, 90% of everybody’s time is spent in some sort of in-between time. Right?

Paul wants to allay the fears of the Philippians that things are falling apart. No, he says, things are ok; they are on-track, because the enterprise of Christ is not in his hands where they think it is, but in God’s and God sees so much more than we do, God sees the whole arc and architecture of history, if you will.

Paul lets the Philippians know that one of the promises of being a Christian is not that life will be easy. It may, in fact be hard. It may look like everything is coming off the rails.

What is true, however, is that from the first day to the last, God in some mysterious way will remain faithful – always.

Even when we feel most alone, or forlorn we can still know that God’s spirit is with us.

My guess is that Paul was so moved by the love of these people, lived out in the example of the young man, Epaphroditus, that he saw in that boy’s love and sacrifice all the steadfast love of God. When Epaphroditus stuck his head in Paul’s cell, what Paul saw was the face of Christ.

And you know what that is like. You’ve had that experience – from a hospital bed, or late at night when your car breaks down, you know what it feels like to see that face. Maybe that’s why your even here.

You’ve been that for someone, sometime, too. Right? When unexpectedly you showed up on someone’s porch who needed a hug just then.

You did what that boy, Epaphroditus, did. Just by showing up in the name of Christ, you bring Jesus to those in need. And you know what, you don’t have to be Florence Nightingale, or Mother Teresa. You just have to be yourself.

Here’s a story I like by someone who did a very important thing. Someone who delivered a very important message and she did by just being true to herself. Mostly by just by showing up. Her name is Carol. These are Carol’s words, but because it is almost Christmas, I am also thinking about Jesus’s young mother, Mary:

*When I was a teenager, my small town high school expelled unmarried pregnant students. Our town was said to have the highest per-capita teenage pregnancy rate in the nation. Every year, high school graduation rates fell because so many young pregnant women were forced to quit school.*

*In 1973 I became the first pregnant student in my town to be allowed to stay in school. Of course, I had to conceal my pregnancy at first. Then, when I was six months pregnant I married my boyfriend. The school had no policy against married pregnant students so I was allowed to stay.*

*Staying in school wasn’t easy. My phys-ed teacher believed I should suffer for my “sins.” When I was nine months pregnant she made me serve as the pin- setter for bowling. I wobbled around setting pins upright and toppled over twice.*

*Shortly before my daughter was born a student named Laura told me that she too was expecting. She wasn’t married, so the principal planned to expel her.*

*I immediately went to the principal’s office and plopped down in the chair across from him. My condition clearly made him uncomfortable. I argued that Laura, a straight-A student, deserved to complete school. He seemed uninterested.*

*“I’ll just sit here until you decide,” I said. He looked nervously at my belly, as if I might give birth at any minute. He could see that I wasn’t going anywhere.*

*[Something in the culture of the 1970s, something about those changing times that was bigger than he was] had finally reached his office. Laura was allowed to remain in school and she graduated at the top of our class.*

"I am confident of this,” says Paul. “That the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. “ Paul is saying, simply, “Take courage.”

Paul wants us all to have something we might call *common courage,* because that is what it takes to live effectively in this world, to make a difference.

That’s what Epaphroditus found within himself to do what he had to do, and pregnant Carol, too, life being so much more complex and challenging than they first imagined.

Think of what must have gone through Carol’s mind when she decided she could not stay quiet – she had to confront the powers in her high school – not for herself, but for another.

It’s so easy to stay quiet – until you feel, sometimes suddenly, that to preserve any self respect at all, you have to speak up.

I love something the poet, e.e. cummings once said. He said,

*To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else, means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting. (repeat)*

The powers that be too often look down on little you and me, and they say to us something to the effect of, “Shut up and color.”

And, if we will remain true to ourselves, we will say, “No way.” Epaphroditus did not give up, neither did Carol.

And here’s how you do it. You just decide to do that thing you know is worth doing; something you might not feel able to do, but you start on it anyway, knowing all you have to do is take is one baby step at a time.

Common courage. It may not be the courage of a medal-of-honor winner.

No, just the every day nuts and bolts courage of people who put one foot in front of the other, facing what there is for that day, good or bad, and leaving the rest to the one who will complete it all according to God’s timetable.

And look, sometimes the powers that be say worse things than “Shut up and color.”

I’m thinking this morning of Ruby Freeman and Shaye Moss of Fulton County, Georgia. They were the election workers that Rudy Guliani defamed by name, thinking they were little nobodies and he could get away with telling huge lies about a fair presidential election he said was stolen.

When a Federal jury in Washington D.C. returned a judgment against Guliani amounting to $148 million dollars these women emerged from the courthouse to speak to America.

Ruby Freeman told reporters that her life is forever changed.

“I want people to understand this: Money will never solve all of my problems. I can never move back into the house that I called home.

I will always have to be careful about where I go and who I choose to share my name with. I miss my home. I miss my neighbors and I miss my name.”

And then she spoke out of a deep well of faith she has.

She said, “Don’t be sad for me. Don’t waste your time being angry at those who did this to me and my daughter,” and she quoted the apostle we are speaking about today: “We are more than conquerors as we continue to fight the good fight.”

This letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi would be his last public word to anybody, as far as we know. He would shortly be executed. The text from that letter that is our focus today suggests to us his knowledge of that fact. And yet he writes the following wonderful admonitions that call us to a living and radiant hope:

"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence; if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Philippians 4:8)

So, on this week before Christmas, before we go wherever we are going to sit down with whoever we are going to feast with, let us take to heart, as the apostle urges, all that is true, all that is honorable, all that is just and pure; all that is excellent and worthy of praise.

In the face of everything in this life that daily threatens to break our hearts, let us do our best to trust that, in the long run, truth and love will have the last word.

Amen